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Purvis: Part One Of Three

Denis Johnson

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PURVIS

Part One of Three

Melvin Purvis (1903–1960) began as a Special Agent in the U.S. Justice Department. In 1932, J. Edgar Hoover placed him in charge of the Chicago office of Hoover's new Division of Investigation, which soon became the FBI.

Over a six-month period in 1934, Purvis's pursuit of the nation's most famous "Public Enemies" put him in the spotlight. Apparently envious, Hoover drove him from the Bureau the following year.

After leaving law-enforcement, Purvis married and raised three children, making his living as a radio broadcaster and as the head of the "Junior G-man" public relations campaign for Post Toasties cereal.

Some important dates:

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June, 1933—Under the suspected direction of Charles "Pretty Boy"

Floyd, gangsters ambush police and agents transferring a prisoner in Kansas City, killing three policemen and Special Agent Ray Caffrey, the first "G-man" to die in action.

March, 1934—Bank robber John Dillinger escapes from jail in Indiana and crosses a state line, making himself a federal fugitive.

May, 1934—Under Purvis's direction, federal agents ambush Dillinger and Lester Gillis—aka "Baby Face Nelson"—at the Little Bohemia Inn on Star Lake, Wisconsin. Both criminals escape while two bystanders are killed. Later that night in a second gunfight Nelson kills one of Purvis's agents before escaping again.

July, 1934—Purvis heads a team of agents and local police who assassinate John Dillinger outside the Biograph Theater in Chicago.

October, 1934—Purvis participates in the killing of Pretty Boy Floyd in a cornfield near Wellsville, Ohio.

November, 1934—Baby Face Nelson dies in a shootout with federal agents on an Illinois roadside. Two agents also die.

February 29, 1960—Purvis dies of a bullet wound from a .45 he received as a gift from fellow agents when he resigned. The death is ruled a suicide, though some evidence suggests it may have been an accident.

In seven scenes, *Purvis* follows history backward from 1966 (six years after Purvis's death) to the evening of the "Bohemia Inn Shootout" in 1934.

Scenes One and Two follow. The remaining scenes will be published in our Fall and Winter issues.

CHARACTERS

LYNDON JOHNSON
J. EDGAR HOOVER
CLYDE TOLSON
JOHN DILLINGER
MELVIN PURVIS
JOB INTERVIEWER
PRETTY BOY FLOYD
OHIO STATE HIGHWAY PATROLMAN
BABY FACE NELSON

A LYNCHED BLACK MAN
AN OFFICE SECRETARY
A WOMAN BOUND AND GAGGED

Scene 1: The White House Oval Office, October, 1966.

Scene 2: The home of J. Edgar Hoover, March 1, 1960.

Scene 3: A fathomless void, February 29, 1960.

Scene 4: An office at KSBC radio, Florence, South Carolina, spring, 1959.

Scene 5: An office of the U.S. Division of Investigation, Chicago, January, 1935.

Scene 6: A cornfield near Wellsville, Ohio, October 22, 1934.

Scene 7: A hotel suite on Star Lake, Wisconsin, May, 1934.

An ellipsis [...] beginning a line is meant to suggest a pause.

"You may break your heart; but men will go on as before."

—Marcus Aurelius

Scene 1

The White House Oval Office, 1966.

In a small zone of light, Lyndon Johnson and J. Edgar Hoover play gin rummy, Hoover in a business suit, Johnson in shirt and necktie, socks, undershorts.

Johnson pours himself generous drinks of bourbon. Hoover sips sherry.

A lynched black man hangs in the dimness just outside the zone illuminated.

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JOHNSON: The Mormon angels landed here from Mars.

They claim to bring a major revelation,
But look you close: It's just so old it's new.
Naturally they revive polygamy.
They're polishing up the ancient creeds
And revving up the old dictates,
Virgin sacrifice and every scary
Type of genital mutilation and
Putting your hand on your balls when you swear a lie.

HOOVER: —Elvis Presley is a clever robot.

JOHNSON: Mark me,
The aliens wouldn't touch the Eastern Block:
They ain't nuts, just incomprehensible.
They've never said so much as boo to us.
They've got to have some outfit fronting them.
Who sends his ticklish tendrils in behind

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The phony fronts? Our man J. Edgar Hoover.
I want the goddamn Mormons infiltrated.

HOOVER: Lyndon, do you mean to indicate
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day
Saints has extraterrestrial origins?

JOHNSON: I mean of course I don't mean Mars *per se*.
Just outer space. And if they're emissaries,
Then they've got outer-space angelic leaders,
Someone who dispatched them here from blackness.
Soon's they're ready, they'll negotiate,
And I mean to say negotiate with *us*.
We'll find the outer-space administrators
And cut ourselves a deal. We'll dangle them
The Soviet Union and one thousand virgins.

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HOOVER: You overestimate our populace's
Moral amplitude.

JOHNSON: One *hundred* virgins.

HOOVER: And you anticipate the politics
Of creatures we can't even guess about.

JOHNSON: Nope. They're good old boys in search of profit.
If they were commies they'd'a' lost the space race.
I don't care how many arms and feet
And slimy orifices God supplied you,
It's hope of raw materials and markets
That drives the steam from out your rocket's asshole.
Gin.

Denis Johnson

HOOVER: No thanks.

JOHNSON: That's gin for me.

HOOVER: Make mine
Another sherry... No. This isn't rummy!

JOHNSON: Three fours, four jacks, a run of spades.

HOOVER: Go fish!

JOHNSON: Now why, when fortune blows a little stink
Up your kimona, do you seek to change the game?
Falling behind should goad your appetites:
Sting you to whap the shit off the butt of your jeans
And hook that bull by his nostril-ring.

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HOOVER: You brew
One nauseating mess of metaphors.
... We've got bigger fish to fry than Mormons.

JOHNSON: Martians.

HOOVER: Lyndon, Mr. President,
You spoke of leaders. Let us *speak* of leaders.

JOHNSON: A hunnerd twenty five and—flip them—three,
And thirty—hunnerd fifty-eight for me.

HOOVER: I'll not disperse among the Mormon fold
A hatch of undercover Martian-hunters.
They'll end up married to a bunch of milk-maids.

JOHNSON: We've got Andromedans athwart our women.
They breed with Mormon females to make monsters.
Stick your spyglass in amongst that mess.

HOOVER: My fondest vision is to map the hairs
And very capillaries of the least
Significant citizen and begin a file.
To tongue and probe the grossness in the soul
Of every enemy of the American dream.

JOHNSON: And what exactly is the American Dream?

HOOVER: I've just described it.

JOHNSON: Tonguing, probing—

HOOVER: Infinitesimal infiltration
And alphabetization of the masses.
But not the Mormons—yet. Someday; my word.
Now, Lyndon. Mr. President.

JOHNSON: That's gin.

HOOVER: Gin?

JOHNSON: I play the hand that's dealt me.

HOOVER: Dealt?
I dealt you gin, a pat hand, one two three?

JOHNSON: The odds come long, but once upon a time
We all were zygotes in a long-odds race.

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People may complain, J. Ed, but think:
We're each the luckiest sperm there ever was.

HOOVER: You S.O.B. You stacked the goshdarn deck.

JOHNSON: How did I stack a deck I never held?

HOOVER: Thus we hear your enemies crying.

JOHNSON: Stud.
—A hand of stud. All right, you're high: Queen bets.

HOOVER: Queen, sir?

JOHNSON: I'm sorry, *King* of spades. Your bet.

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HOOVER: Mr. President, I wouldn't bet
A hamster's giblets on the King of Spades.

JOHNSON: ... Don't you think I know what brings you here?
I've dealt with darkness ever' step along.
Every ounce I've laid on the side of clean
I've goddamn nearly had to match with dirty.
The Civil Rights Act, nineteen sixty-four:
There the scale bangs down decisively
For victorious good. My life is right.
—I'm paired.

HOOVER: It's lowball, and the pot is mine.

[*Phone rings.*]

JOHNSON: You love to monkey with the rules ... [*On phone:*] What say?

The Iowa Review

...I see. And don't we have our whole Sixth Fleet
Playing war games down along those parts?
...No. I won't. Keep me apprized. That's all. [*Hangs up.*]
...My legacy is civil rights for all.

HOOVER: Martin Luther King has got to go.

[*Phone rings.*]

JOHNSON [*on the phone*]: Who's this? (Go on and shuffle please, J. Ed.)

Yes, Admiral, I am aware. The submarines,
The nuclear. I'm rattling our saber.

—This is your President. Alert the fleet.

Mao has got to know the ocean's ours.

[*Hangs up.*]

We all agree you've got me where you want me:

How do you like my starburst undershorts?

I don't bawl, I'll take my punishment

For letting a weasel get me by the eggs.

But I can have a dab of shellfish compound

Here in my palm by two this afternoon

(Thanks to the chemists at the CIA)

To make it look like heart conditions killed me;

And I won't even have to lick it up:

It sinks into the flesh. And sink it will,

And I sink too, before I let the weasel

Devour my entire house. My deal.

HOOVER: (Those vicious chemists at the CIA.)

JOHNSON: (Chairman Mao can kiss my bony ass.)

—I'm on a little junket Saturday.

Georgia, Tennessee, the Carolinas.

HOOVER: Just the time of year!

JOHNSON: The votes down there
Just might stay Democrat another decade,
Although we smell a sea-change.

HOOVER: Lovely weather.

JOHNSON: Smooch the infants, snip the ribbons, such-like.
Dedicate this one museum there. This feller
Elvis Purvis is the hero of it.
Down around where he called home. The man
Who collared Dillinger. Remember him?

HOOVER: Several agents collared Dillinger
With the assistance of the whole Division.
Later Purvis murdered Pretty Boy Floyd.
I have the officer's written recollection,
The Kansas cop, or whatever state it was.
On Purvis's orders, he dispatched the wounded
Prisoner with a bullet to the brain.

JOHNSON: A perjured recollection?

HOOVER: Written. Signed.
And decades later, Purvis shot himself.
I take that as the plainest *mea culpa*.

JOHNSON: The South Carolina Criminal Justice Hall
Of Fame. The Elvis Purvis Gun Display!
—Elvis? That his name?

HOOVER: His name was Melvin.

The Iowa Review

JOHNSON: I'll be saying words in praise of him.
The nation sighs; let's celebrate our heroes.
Purvis; Kennedy; Martin Luther King.

HOOVER: We want straight arrows, boy scouts, true believers.
What we can't abide are vivid heroes.
If a man should stand too high, well then, well then,
We'll lop him at the legs. As I did Purvis.

JOHNSON: A preacher ain't nothing to fret you, Herr Director.
Preachers rise and fall.

HOOVER: King's dangerous.

JOHNSON: They sit themselves on golden toilets, wiping
Their holes with hunnerds, talking on two phones
While flying around in bright red jet airplanes,
Don't pay no tax on half a cent of it,
Nobody says boo. What shoots 'em down?
What finally shoots 'em down? It's good old poon,
The whores and mistresses and altar boys.
You'd like to hound and tree a man already
Besieged by willing females who'll destroy him,
These underfucked and overfed and half-
Way unzipped Baptist slatterns shyly come
To sprawl themselves upon his offices.
And some of 'em are sexy. Comely. Cuddly.
Here you want to take him in your cross-hairs
And thunder him to earth, with all
The messy implications that implies.

HOOVER: The population is a nightmare seething

On the earth. We can't let heroes rise to wake
The monster into chaos.

JOHNSON: "I have a dream ..."

HOOVER: Man's best ordered into hives and warrens.
Public schools, vast corporate factories,
Housing projects ... concentration camps ...
I'm going to knock with three.

JOHNSON: Let's see, let's see,
That's twenty points. You'll catch me soon.

HOOVER: I'm bored.

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JOHNSON: I come from westward-roaming pioneers.
I like to sling my big old Eldorado
Around the roads on my place, hollering
And firing my revolver and raising dust
And gunsmoke. You won't get me in a hive.

HOOVER: I'm not going to infiltrate the Mormons.

JOHNSON: The last assassination crippled us.
[*He lifts the receiver and dials. On the phone:*]
What news? ... Is that a fact? Well, well. I swan.
He must be facing some internal strife,
Some rumbling among his favored generals.
Try the following: Sweep the guns of the fleet
Across their bows. If they keep coming, raise
The subs and let them see our nukes. [*Hangs up.*]
... So freedom is a dusty artifact.

HOOVER: You'll have your Civil Rights Bill, Excellency.
You just won't have your heroes. You must suffer
The lack of such as King and Kennedy.

JOHNSON: I miss John Kennedy. I miss his wife.
They think I rigged his killing. They'd believe that of me.

HOOVER: Yet you've done much worse.

JOHNSON: The other thing.

HOOVER: The other thing. The undiscussable matter.

[*Phone rings.*]

JOHNSON: (The Martians aren't our only misery.)
[*On the phone:*]
... Let him come. What say we weigh his pecker?
... Turn them subs toward the mainland now
And prime the missiles. Let him see our eyeballs.
[*Hangs up.*]

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HOOVER: Friend, let's discuss the undiscussable.

JOHNSON: I wish I *had* killed John F. Kennedy.
And Lincoln. And Caesar. Murder in pursuit
Of power, well,—

HOOVER: it's easy to imagine.

JOHNSON: That's why they imagine it of me.
The other thing is past imagining.

Denis Johnson

HOOVER: The other thing is undiscussable.

JOHNSON: Speaking of artifacts and speaking of peckers,
What's the story on Dillinger's remains?

HOOVER: Ach! Purvis is responsible for that legend.
He let reporters photograph the corpse.

JOHNSON: May we all have such a legend told of us.

HOOVER: He made it necessary that each daily tour
Of FBI headquarters should begin
With a denial of that vulgar fantasy.

JOHNSON: You mean it's merely a *tale* that Dillinger ...

HOOVER: That he was marvelous between his legs?
That his gigantic organ was collected,
And in a jar in some museum we have set
Adrift his pickled genitalia?
... No, my President, the tale is false.

JOHNSON: I understand the great American Novel
is *Moby-Dick*.

HOOVER: I disagree.

[*Phone rings.*]

JOHNSON [*on phone*]: What news?
... Not yet. I smell a bluff. Just stay the course.
[*Hangs up.*]

Mao Tse-tung will get Taiwan. He'll swallow
Vietnam and a chunk of southern Russia,
But Mao will by God never get my balls—
[*Phone rings.*]
[*On phone:*]—you hear? ... I won't give in. Let's stare him down.
[*Hangs up.*]
Them goddamn sonabitching commie Chinks.

HOOVER: Sir, the greatest error of our century
Was Truman's failure to bombard the horde
In 1953.

JOHNSON: You mean with nukes.

HOOVER: I do. MacArthur would have finished them.
Instead, from that seed of mercy will grow all
The terrors of the third millennium.

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JOHNSON: Right in here's the famous crimson button.

HOOVER: Aren't there wires?

JOHNSON: No. It's wireless.

HOOVER: Aren't you going to let me see?

JOHNSON: They change
The combination daily.

HOOVER: Well, I'm sure
That I could get it for you.

Denis Johnson

JOHNSON: Sir, I *have* it.
 I'm the President.

HOOVER: Quite so.

JOHNSON: I'm just
 Not certain where they put it.

HOOVER: But it's here.

JOHNSON: Of course it's here. It's *for* the *President*.

HOOVER: I've put it in the major newspapers.
 The *Times*, the *Post*, the *London Times*. And *Pravda*.

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JOHNSON: Well, that's insane. But harmless. Can't set off
 A war with a combination. Got to have
 This button that the combination's *to*.

HOOVER: I mean the other thing. I've sold you off.
 I have discussed the undiscussable.
 I've given it all to the press. Tomorrow's headlines
 Will stretch six inches tall to tell the world that—

JOHNSON: Never mention it anywhere nor ever.

HOOVER: I think a headline in the *Times* and *Post*
 Will constitute a mention, will it not?

JOHNSON: ... And *Pravda*, too?

HOOVER: Just to amuse myself.

JOHNSON: Manure! Why would the organ grinder
Grind up his monkey in his organ?

HOOVER: Maybe
The monkey made too many metaphors.

JOHNSON: Folks say the Gila Monster never shits,
So everything inside him turns to poison.

HOOVER: There you go again.

JOHNSON: You've done it? Really?
You're sick enough, I grant you.

HOOVER: God, you'll never know.

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JOHNSON: I do believe you've gone and done it. I...
I'll be slaughtered like a roach. The mobs
Will mutilate the relics of my flesh
In hope of hurting every molecule.

HOOVER: What you did would merit exactly that.

JOHNSON: I'm bottled up. You've left me skinny choices.
[Phone rings. Rings. Rings.]
I'm going to murder myself in the Oval Office.
I'm going to murder you too.

HOOVER: With a telephone?

JOHNSON: You and everybody else. [On phone:] Who now?
—Well howdy hi. Yes, General, I'm sure
You know I've spoken to the Admiral.

Denis Johnson

... Then don't ask questions either of us could answer.
Ask me something you don't know, for instance
When to conference-call me with the other
Lily-livered commie-loving Chiefs
Of Staff. Let's say at 8:05 p.m.
—If I can start and finish Armageddon
By 8:05, then you can orchestrate
A conference call by then, by God. Hop to!
[*Hangs up.*]
You've brought down Armageddon on my head.
Might as well have jabbed the big red button.

HOOVER: Is it actually red?

JOHNSON: I've never seen it.
—Why don't we take it out for a little spin?
[*Phone rings.*]
[*On phone:*] We need a fifth of Jack and a jug of sherry.
... All right then. Prime our Third Configuration.
... I shit you not. The firstest puff of smoke
You spy from out their smallest little popgun
I intend to answer with a nightmare. [*Hangs up.*]

HOOVER: Third Configuration? Isn't that—

JOHNSON: Let's us do what Truman orto've done.

HOOVER: Won't that spark a Soviet reprisal?

JOHNSON: Spark a reprisal? Sir, at the end of this finger
I've got thirty-two thousand, one hunnerd and ninety-three
Sonofabitchin' nuclear warheads, and

[JOHNSON gulps from a flask.]

JOHNSON: No, sir. Mineral oil:

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[On phone:] ... Yes. I'll use the red phone. [On red phone:] Señor Krushchey!

(Well, he's unloading just a bit of thunder.)

Formula to follow, Comrade Krushchev:

Make him understand he's come between

...If that's the attitude he cares to strike,

God help the Northern Hemisphere. [Other phone rings.] Hang on.

[A receiver in either hand:]

It's eight-oh-what? ... Well, I'm impressed ... Hi, fellers.

"Joint Chiefs of Staff." I hear that phrase

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I can't prevent my mind from picturing
 Pigmies with a spear... Indeed I have.
 We're chatting now ... The red one, yes indeed.
 What color's yours? ... (They're remonstrating with me.
 ... I'm not going to run for a second term.
 I dislike this office. I want corners.
 I don't like a goddamn oval office.)
 [A third phone rings.] Revelation Central; Jesus speaking.
 —Hey! "Huberty Humphrey sat on a wall,
 Huberty Humphrey had a great"—Howdy, Hue.
 [He's now dealing with three phones—a receiver in each hand and one laid
 on the desk before his face.]
 [On phones:] That wart-face Russkie hasn't got the sand.
 We backed him off on Cuba. Here's the thing:
 I don't give one dab of ratshit whether
 We kiss our grandkids in their beds tonight
 Or burn the ocean, earth, and sky to cinders.
 [Throws phones aside.]
 Sir, are you a Christian man? Make peace
 With your creator. Where's the combination?

HOOVER: I've come all over shaking.

JOHNSON: Here we are.
 They change it every goddamn day.

HOOVER: I'm all
 Aquiver and atingle and aglow!

JOHNSON: This is the selfsame finger I itch my ass with.

HOOVER: And that's the magic button!

JOHNSON:

THERE SHE LAYS.

HOOVER: Push it with your member! Rape it! Rape it!

JOHNSON: Mao may get Taiwan—but he'll never get this!

HOOVER: My!—there's megatonnage *there*, good sir!

JOHNSON: I'm gonna drive this thing to Hot Goddamn!

HOOVER: I'm all afire, and abashed. I'm all aswarm,
I'm prancing in a madness! Shall we dance?

A jittlejot of junko juice
A snittlesnot of turn-me-loose
A razzledazz of hello mom
And there you have your atom bomb

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JOHNSON: I've just destroyed the Northern Hemisphere.

HOOVER: The world is ending, and I'm in your arms.

[*Music plays. They dance together.*]

HOOVER: ... I've a confession, darling. April Fools.
I didn't hand your secret to the world.

JOHNSON: It's October.

HOOVER: I'm a kinky boy!

JOHNSON: You didn't tell the *Post*? No *Pravda*?

Denis Johnson

JOHNSON: ... What does it matter? Sooner or later
One of us was going to flush the toilet.

HOOVER: Round and round and down the spout—hurrah!

[They dance near the phones; JOHNSON grabs one.]

JOHNSON: How goes our business? ... What? He's turned around?
Turned around? But what about our nukes?
... All right, rescind the order ... Well, goddamn.
Then don't rescind it, if it wasn't sent.
... What do you mean? Indeed I gave the order.
[Hangs up.]
Apparently this thing's not functioning.

HOOVER: Which thing exactly now?

JOHNSON: Ha-ha. Ha-ha.
Somebody's got a load of explaining to do!

HOOVER: You've got a little explaining to do as well.

JOHNSON: Johnson broke the button with his Johnson.
... Have we amused you? Good. Go home. Go on.
... Get on out, J. Edgar. I must nap.

HOOVER: ... If the commies get us, it won't be by war.
They'll get us in the brain, right in our soft
Impressionable minds. They'll get us in
The coffeehouses and the beatnik poems.

Our spoiled little hairy little children
Dancing in the psychedelic light.
A fond adieu, Your Excellency.

[HOOVER *exits.*]

JOHNSON: I don't feel so excellent today.

[As he dons his clothes, he addresses the hanging corpse.]

... Hook the jug by the ear and hoist it up
For a little smooch. Wonder what I'd do
If somebody ordinarily decent ever
Entered here? Feller like that Purvis.
'Pologize for entertaining in
My skivvies. Turn my liquor breath away.
President of travesties and favors.
Faithful of the balance. Figuring it
To tip down finally on the attractive end.
Unreasonable, childish hope:
And bless you, sojer, may you never spy
The thumbs of bought historians and hostage
Propagandists weighting the boonful side.
I'm traveling to the South week after next.
O, I'll meet Purvis marching in the sunshine:
Son of light, master of undisguise ...
The South, well,—down there, certain airs bring back
The sweetness of a childhood I no longer
Find at all believable, of years
I must have dreamt.—Why did I ever waken?
O I was a knobby little man.
Sir: I put the skinny in skinny-dipping.
Flailing in my slow descent, screaming,
Splashing, the cooling shadow of the bluff
Blanketing us and it all echoing...

I used to like to be the last to leave.
I'd stay there lonely with my chin on my knees,
There by that slow water at the bend
Where right about that time of afternoon
The dragonflies dipped down to drink.
And I'd come running for my father's house,
Hot all over again in the last light,
Thudding like a quarter horse for home,
Falling flat and slurping up the crick.
Lord, that water went down sweet.
... Never since then a truly slakeable thirst ...

JOHNSON *fades from view, leaving visible only the hanging corpse.*

Scene 2

The home of J. Edgar Hoover, March 1, 1960.

Hoover is in silk kimono and garish face-paint.

HOOVER: THE CLOWN IS DEAD!

TOLSON [*entering*]: Jay?

HOOVER: Shot himself!

[*Phone rings offstage.*]

TOLSON [*exiting*]: I'll get it.

In the course of the scene, HOOVER cleans his features and changes into a business suit, preparing for the day's appointments.

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His housemate Clyde TOLSON attends.

HOOVER: Marvin the clown has blown his own clown head off!
Clyde, ring up the *Post*. Ring up the *New York Times*.
I want those rats to promise me he stays
Entombed on the obituary page,
Or certainly never crawls as far as four,
That he rises no higher than five, not one page higher,
And keeps to the lower half. One column inch.
No photograph!—the clown without a face.
I want this cloaked and shrunken in the stench
Of his self-murder. *And*: no Dillinger!
Dillinger broke the law, the law broke him:
Let the glory be the law's, and not

Denis Johnson

Its instrument's, the late lamented Marvin.
 I own he was a modest instrument.
 He didn't slaver after glory, merely
 Postured himself so it accrued to him.
 —Do you know what the poor wretch was reduced to?
 Tomorrow his admirers will read
 That after a stint with breakfast cereal
 He wandered into radio. Somewhere
 Down south he kept the farmers in the know
 And jazzed it up for barnyard animals.
 O, my God, the leader of a horde
 Of Junior G-men! Lovely! —Suicide!
 The Baptists promise Hell for that, I think.
 Dear God, I pray he was your Baptist son.
 “Onward Junior G-he-he me-hen
 Marching as to war! With the cross of Pur-vis—”
 Purvis was the perfect name for him.
 He was perverse: He purposely, perversely
 Projected a lovelorn, stoic decency;
 I believe it to have been primarily prideful,
 Perverse and prideful. Are you calling the *Post*?
 No mention of museums! —The the the the
 South Carolina—nothing of the kind.
 “On then, Junior G-men, on to victory.”

TOLSON [*re-entering*]: Jay—Jay—Jay—Jay ... Melvin Purvis has died.

HOOVER: What news do you suppose I've just been piping
 From the rooftops?

TOLSON: When you pipe I tend
 To fail to listen.

HOOVER: Marvin Purvis is dead.

TOLSON: As I have just informed you.

HOOVER: Who told *you*?

TOLSON: Melvin, actually.

HOOVER: Melvin who, exactly?

TOLSON: Marvin's name was Melvin.

HOOVER: Morton, Mable,
Or Melba Toast—how did you get the news?

TOLSON: I've been on the other line.

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HOOVER: With whom?

TOLSON: With Mrs. Purvis.

HOOVER: Well, you can tell her No.
Why would I be moved to eulogize
Some suicidal platter-spinner? No.
Let him be known as the sometime President
Of the Carolina Broadcast News Assembly.

TOLSON: She had a request.

HOOVER: When's the funeral?

TOLSON: She asks that you not attend the service, Jay.

Denis Johnson

HOOVER: ... I only asked when it was.

TOLSON: Tomorrow at 3 p.m.

HOOVER: ... How did she find our number?

TOLSON: His memo book.

HOOVER: He kept my private number all his life?

TOLSON: ... Get back from there, Jay, have a care.

HOOVER: I am at home. Here I make no bones.

TOLSON: You've been gamboling past the open view
Like a helium-bloated parade animal.

HOOVER: Do you have the *Post* on the phone, as I requested?
I want no mention made of Dillinger!
Or Baby Face or Pretty Boy or Cutie
Pie or Pooh the Bear or—infants' icons!
Clyde, have you seen the wrestlers in Mexico? —
And all these gangsters wore personae like
The Mexican wrestlers do—Clyde, we must get
Immediately a half a dozen fearful
Masks from Mexico, and you and I
Shall wrestle.

TOLSON: Mexico is in the mirror,
Should you care to look. Let me get your suit.

HOOVER: When I was a lad, we played cops and robbers.
Purvis and his gangsters shot it out

The Iowa Review

Across the landscape, but, Clyde, by and large
They played cops and robbers. *We fight wars.*
Our enemies are ideologies,
And we must smash the vessels that purvey them,
And not just this one or that one—all of them:
Black or communist or Ku Klux Klan,
All are rationales for disorder,
All are threats to peace and order,
All will wax to a size to challenge
Eventually authority and justice—

TOLSON: John—John—John—John—John—
John, the temple is going to burst asunder.

HOOVER: And talk to the *New York Times*. The pinko shifts.

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TOLSON: The vein is standing out all blue and ropy—

HOOVER: The *Jew York Times*, more like it.

TOLSON: Let's not start.

HOOVER: The goose step is unattractive, I concede,
But in the man's defense—what now?

TOLSON: To bring your pressure down ... Take two ...
Get dressed.

HOOVER: Patriotism, vision, strength,
Consistency and elegance of concept—

TOLSON: Please, Jay, not the Hitler diatribe—

Denis Johnson

HOOVER: Do we draw across the face of these fine values
Sort of a black veil because a tragic villain
Happened to possess them? I refuse.

TOLSON: I love you.

HOOVER: (Yes, the pinstripe double-breasted.)
The goose-step is both ominous and silly,
I warrant, but in the man's defense, he didn't
Invent the goosetep...

TOLSON: John ... I love you, John.

HOOVER: ... HITLER INVENTED THE TWENTIETH CENTURY!
He instituted the control of guns.
We need such a law ourselves, do we not?
May I point out that whereas the Negro may have
To swim up waterfalls to cast a vote,
He nevertheless may purchase firearms?

TOLSON: Suck in. Zip up.

HOOVER: BRING ME THE OBITUARY
OF MARTIN LUTHER KING.

TOLSON: Suck *in* your *gut*.
You have a 2 p.m. appointment with
Senator Johnson.

HOOVER: The senior senator
From Cowturdania. Him a good ole boy.

TOLSON: He's set aside a half an hour for you.

The Iowa Review

HOOVER: How would you like to see me double that?
One call and his whole afternoon is mine.
He'll drop the German Chancellor for me.

TOLSON: He owes you favors.

HOOVER: He owes me more than favors.
Bring me a deck of cards. —We'll play gin rummy!
—In our underwear!

TOLSON: But I don't play gin rummy.

HOOVER: Not you and I! The Senator and I!
He'll play rummy with me if that's my pleasure,
And in his undershorts, if that's my pleasure.
But I think I'll save that game for the Oval Office,
And play it with the President, half-naked.

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TOLSON: With Eisenhower? Does he fancy cards?

HOOVER: With LBJ, after he takes the White House.

TOLSON: Will LBJ be president one day?

HOOVER: What earthly circumstance would stay the man?
Cremation, and his ashes on the wind.
Go fish. He's got a really enormous dick.
We'll have a round of Crazy Eights if I
Decree it.

TOLSON: An enormous what?

HOOVER: Shlazool.

Denis Johnson

Often he pulls it out to drive a point home.
“Mao’s got China but he ain’t got nuthin’ lack ’is.”

TOLSON: Has Elvis Presley become the President?

HOOVER: And Eisenhower! —chrome-dome imbecile.
Unless he’s reading from a page the man’s
Aphasic. Now we’ve given him a button
He can push to set off World War Three.

TOLSON: An awesome power. He—

HOOVER: It doesn’t work.

TOLSON: It doesn’t—doesn’t—

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HOOVER: Doesn’t do a thing.
Push it all day long, he won’t succeed
In summoning a shoeshine.

TOLSON: Well!—

HOOVER: What do you take us for? The button’s phony.
When is supper? Should I be home for supper?

TOLSON: You are persona non grata.

HOOVER: What are we having?

TOLSON: Grated persona non grata.
—Jay, back. —First in costume, now half naked.

HOOVER: They don’t know me.

The Iowa Review

TOLSON: Only that you live here,
Only that the windows of Director
Hoover's Georgetown mansion wink
With images of a runaway mannequin.

HOOVER: How will my obituary read?
"Hoover was a fascist bureaucrat, a spy
For Adolph Hitler, shredder of the Bill of Rights,"—
And that's if I succeed. But if I fail:
"Hoover let the tendrils of a cancer
Flourish in the very neck of God and choke him
To death."

TOLSON: I guess you're meaning Communism.

HOOVER: "Hoover in silk kimono and garish paint!"
What does it matter? The earth swallows us all.
Behold Melvin Purvis: who led a life,
Who strove, triumphed, prospered, failed, declined
And perished and tomorrow at 3 p.m.
Rejoins the elements; and the same awaits
The ones he left to mourn him,
All of us forgotten in the dirt.
—Where's my Marcus Aurelius? Where's my Marcus Aurelius?
I must read him every morning, a few lines.—
"Hoover with his secret files and blackmail!"

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TOLSON: Crying out for Marcus Aurelius
As for a slave.

HOOVER: And in my history
I want no mention made of Dillinger.
I will not stand to have the *Post* cry down

Denis Johnson

The roll of dust-bowl tommy-gunner rubes.
"Pretty Boy," "Machine Gun," "Baby Face,"
"Legs" and "Dutch" and "Bugsy." Dillinger.
This suit's too blue.

TOLSON: Too late. The black wingtips—

HOOVER: Nelson killed one of ours at Lake Geneva,
And again, in his final fight, he took two more.
They shot him to pieces, but he left them dying
And stole their vehicle and drove away.
A beast. He never marked a difference
Between manslaughter and the wringing of
A dinner-chicken's neck. And Dillinger!
The spawn of the ungodly partnering
Of our press's sideshow cynicism
And that gawking yokel, the American soul.
What's this!

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TOLSON: Your nitroglycerin, m'lord.

HOOVER: "Baby Face Nelson." I saw his face. His face
Was not a baby's even in infancy.
I saw him laid out nude and green and pocked
With bullet wounds like small blue mouths.
Before or since I've never looked on death,
Not even Mother in the mortuary,
Only the runty scofflaw Baby Face.
He had the barrel-belly and stick-limbs
Of a starved Iowa farmer. I wouldn't doubt
He'd chomped his share of dust behind the plow.
... Look, you—do you think a clown in costume
Carries no soul inside him, do you think

I'm not a vessel which, when tipped, pours out
The oil of compassion in the beading dirt?
I am a cake of ash surrounding solar
Lusts and molten agonies. Gangsters?
Whatever I arrest them for I've done in *here*.
Whatever their desire drives them to,
Wherever this terrible engine guides or goads them,
I stand there waiting.—Marcus Aurelius!
Hear this, hear this:

“Everything is banal in experience, fleeting in duration, sordid in
content; in all respects the same today as generations now dead
and buried have found it to be.”

Here—you—the other, the other—

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TOLSON: “A little while, and all that is before your eyes now will have
perished. Those who witness its passing will go the same road
themselves before long; and then what will there be to choose be-
tween the oldest grandfather and the baby that dies in its cradle?”

HOOVER: Behold Melvin Purvis! —
Squeezed through the story of a life as from
One end and out the other of a python;
And thence to fertilize the graveyard grass—
To feed the thatch of corpses' houses.

TOLSON: This one.

HOOVER: Too red!

TOLSON: It matches.

Denis Johnson

HOOVER: Red is not my color!

TOLSON: ... There. You're beautiful. —Here, wash it down.

HOOVER: Purvis, Dillinger, lying in your graves:
Assemble your eyeballs from your dead dust to watch
J. Edgar Hoover swallow dynamite!

BLACKOUT